

***Statement of Rep. Mark Green, WI-08  
House Committee on Government Reform,  
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources  
Legislative Hearing  
Authorizing the President's Vision: Making Permanent The Faith-Based and Community  
Initiative***

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

When President Bush issued his executive orders to establish the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, he said, "Faith-based and other community organizations are indispensable in meeting the needs of poor Americans and distressed neighborhoods. Government cannot be replaced by such organizations, but it can and should welcome them as partners." I agree, and I believe most Americans do as well.

This government-community organization partnership is a critical part of helping our communities find tools to deal with the problems society faces. While, in some ways, this partnership hasn't developed as quickly as it could or should, great progress has been made on a number of fronts.

In order to build on this success, we need to continue reaching out to community groups that are trying to help our citizens who need it the most. Throughout history, faith-based organizations have shown that they understand the problems their communities are facing. After all, of course, they have relationships with the people they serve. They view those in need not as clients, but as neighbors. They are programs like Rawhide Boys Ranch, an organization in Waupaca County, Wisconsin, that helps troubled boys straighten out their lives; and Holy Redeemer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a church that helps feed the hungry and find shelter for the homeless. These are organizations that reach out to help those in need, not in order to further a religious ideology, but because their mission is simply to help their neighbor.

Unfortunately, faith-based groups have been unnecessarily restricted from serving the public as well as they could because of the beliefs they hold. I say "unnecessarily" because as long as these organizations open their doors to everyone and do not require participation in their religious operations, they can and should be allowed to participate in federal grant programs. Instead of closing doors to these groups, we should open them wider so more people have additional opportunities to receive services and improve their lives.

We must honor and follow the first amendment to the Constitution when it says that government shall not establish a religion. But that same amendment also requires us to honor religious liberty. And that means allowing these groups to both practice their faith and serve their fellow Americans.

The Bush Administration has tried to accomplish this through its executive orders creating the White House Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The office, and its liaisons in various agencies, have the tools and relationships to help break down barriers that hold these groups back unnecessarily. While more needs to be done, this initiative has already

helped people fight addiction, stop youth violence, find a home, stay out of prison and manage diseases like AIDS.

Another way the administration has helped is by creating the Compassion Capital Fund. Since its launch three years ago, it has provided \$99.5 million in grants to 197 organizations and sub-grants to over 1,700 grass-roots organizations, provided nearly \$100 million for the access to recovery program, provided new grant money to increase mentors for children of prisoners by 33,000 people. Overall, the office has increased grants to faith-based organizations by 20%.

This is excellent work that we must continue to build upon. Most importantly, we need to ensure stability within the program from one administration to the next. We must also ensure our federal offices are coordinating with state liaisons to ensure that every state understands the opportunities that are available to them.

Incidentally, many states are beginning to recognize the value of state faith-based offices. Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm created a state office of community and faith-based initiatives recently that will enlist religious organizations to recruit mentors for foster children, provide lower-cost prescription drugs and fight substance abuse.

Unfortunately, most states haven't followed Michigan's example. Just over 25 states have created offices or established state liaisons to work with the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. With increasing needs and budget concerns, states need these partnerships to help them maximize opportunities to meet community needs.

There's little doubt some groups will continue to attack faith-based partnerships, and fight any government partnership with any group with religious connections. Governor Granholm responded to such criticism when she said, "this is not about a particular faith. This is about serving the citizens in the most effective way."

Well-said. This initiative is about serving people in the most effective way. We must embrace the work these organizations can do and work with them and the states to help us meet our community and social challenges. With this initiative, we are finding mentors for kids in need, homes for the homeless, help for those with AIDS and alternatives to gangs. No one should stand in the way of organizations that are responsibly trying to help these kids just because they are faith-based.

I am currently developing legislation that guarantees that the faith-based initiative will continue in the years ahead and that every organization that wants to help is able to. I believe we must show that government is committed to helping our citizens by making the faith-based initiative a statutory feature in our executive branch and ensure equal treatment for all. This long-term commitment provides critical predictability to community groups, and lets them know this is not a passing government enterprise that will end abruptly with a new president.

There's more the leaders of the faith-based initiative have to do to better help those in need, but they have done some great work to date. It is my hope my legislation will begin a larger debate about what new steps should be taken to help facilitate and foster the efforts of the government and our nation's benevolent service organizations.

Thank you for your time and consideration today.